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Hollywood & Media Portrayals of Veterans with PTSD #1

Hollywood & Media Portrayals of Veterans Who Suffer From Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Francesca Katafias

Senior Capstone

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Hollywood & Media Portrayals of Veterans with PTSD #2

According to the U.S Department of Veterans Affairs: National Center for PTSD, it's recorded that, "approximately 11-20 out of every 100 Veterans (or between 11-20%) who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom have PTSD in a given year". In my research study, my focus is to better understand Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, how prevalent it is in military veterans, and how the media (Hollywood) projects our veterans to be to the public. There are three important questions I have put together to further explore my topic without losing direction on my prime focus. The three questions I will research and seek answers for start out blunt and simple. The first question I have put together is, "What is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)? What are the signs and symptoms?" next I ask, "Does Hollywood accurately portray veterans who come home from war and suffer from PTSD? How so, or how did they not? Examples" and finally, "how have Hollywood war films depicted PTSD war veterans who come home?" Research questions are highly valuable to a research project because it allows a researcher, such as myself to stay focused and stay on track with their topic and "end goal" or conclusion.

Although my topic relates to Hollywood's perception and portrayal of war veterans, I am also exploring and expanding on the topic of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Before claiming credibility or discussing with great depth about the topic, I must first explore what this neurological disease is and how our military veterans develop it. With the help of my research question basic starting points for my topic were established. In a study conducted by Bessel van der Kolk and Lisa. M. Najavits (2013), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was not recognized as a critical condition as of late 1982, according to Kolk and Najavits , "it had never been demonstrated that the diagnosis

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PTSD is *relevant* to the mission of the Veterans Administration.” Meaning that the Veterans Administration saw no relevance with this so called “condition” and everyday life Kolk and Najavits continue to report, “at that time the VA’s position was that the war had nothing to do with veterans’ pathology”. These minor details have paved the direction for the particular section in my research.

One goal of this study, especially in it’s infancy stages, is to indicate the various levels and severe stages Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Paul A. Arbisi argued in his 2012 Psychological Assessment and *Predictive Validity of the PTSD Checklist in a Nonclinical Sample of Combat-Exposed National Guard Troops*, that PTSD was to be evaluated in one of two ways. First step was a PTSD checklist otherwise known as PCL-M as the article suggests. The second method is referred to as the Beck Depression Inventory or BDI-II. Following the two tests, just three months later a Clinician-Administered PTSD Scale (CAP S) was given to three hundred and forty-eight National Guard soldiers who participated in the study. Various tests and clinically administered tests were run to collect the logistics pertaining to how many soldiers had PTSD and to what extent. The results concluded that some tests proved more effective than others. For example, the clinically administered PTSD scale had the most “false positive errors”; because of these results, Arbisi used results from (CAP S) and outside interviews to conclude that, “6.5% of the soldiers tested met the quota for PTSD”.

When cross-comparing the research I have gathered, this study closely emulates the research conducted by H. Huang. All of the articles up until this point actively pursue legitimate subjects making it easier to work with and create a malleable study. By engaging hundreds of participants, both researchers once again shed light on the idea that

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PTSD may actually hold depth then publically announced. In their studies, Huang, Kolk and Najavits as well as Arbisi make it their academic mission to expose the various levels and severities this trauma is capable of. There is enough information to support the entirety of the article but I still question how it is that these “tests” were created and what credibility do they carry.

Strategically, the best way to establish credibility concerning a neurological condition is to study the condition itself. By educating myself and researching Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, I have an ability to create a stable foundation for this introduction explaining exactly what PTSD is and why background on the condition is relevant. I believe that due to the subjects used to collect data, my research will carry more depth, disregarding any potential for singling out one specific branch of the United States military. By further evaluating the data collected in studies and cinemas under examination. Each source will surely express just how prominent different levels of PTSD are in particular situations or settings. I look forward to comparing Kolk and Najavits study to Paul Arbisi’s study to support my claim that PTSD isn’t just a mental illness that can occur in a single traumatic event and be cured, but that the condition is an emotional wound, psychological injury that can develop over time and possess many tiers of “damage”. Some tiers are more tolerable than others.

Eventually, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder will have to be assessed and correlated with the media. Thomas Armstrong and Bunmi Olatunji (2009) created a study that solely focuses on the relationship between identifying Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and how the media represents the condition as well as the veterans who have it. There are two rich arguments about the controversy media outlets face when discussing

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PTSD as well as the media's bias towards issues of sensitivity. Armstrong and Olatunji

were inspired and ultimately formed their research based on the theory that media can and has the ability to increase awareness for PTSD. By using the media to raise positive awareness about PTSD, various channels of media are able to give a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves, opposed to created harsh stigmas punishing veterans.

Unfortunately society fails to remember that a majority of American service men and women began their military careers as psychologically underdeveloped young adults ranging from 18-25 years of age. Many theories and scientific studies validate the idea that ages 18-25 is a crucial time for brain development. Trauma's endured during war have the capability to reduce or stunt psychological growth.

Attaining a piece of research capable of blending well with the other sources gathered for research is quite valuable. By analyzing contemporary values used to create war films, it allows the possibility to seek faults. It also allows the ability to address modern day concerns and questions surrounding the study of PTSD and how the media chooses to broadcast information collected. Some of the findings in "Fighting the Good Fight: The Real and the Moral in the Contemporary Hollywood Combat Film"(2005) are similar to other findings that have come across in previous articles and research. Due to the nature of this article, I believe that this source is a credible one because of its ability to build a strong platform supporting that a "Vietnam vet is a victim of war- one who fought for his country and then was rejected by it". Philippa Gates, the author of this article makes a compelling claim against society and media influence. She analyzes multiple 1970 films with themes specifically targeting veterans returning from combat. I agree with the stance Gates takes on the subject matter. As an author/researcher I connect

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with her findings because it's similar in intention and purpose.

Through a series of scholastic journals, I am able to fit the perfect amount of information into this research. My source hold the power to transition the study from addressing PTSD as a whole into how Hollywood and the media play a detrimental role in the education and perception of the condition. Ideas actively formed throughout the media portion of this study about how people who were diagnosed with the trauma and how they were able to recover while separating those who are not affected yet proactively helped those who do. As noted previously, the power media outlets have the power to shape societal views of PTSD are huge. The media in past decades has formed the "norm" as to how society should address the psychological condition and how veterans with the illness should internally address their illness. The "norm" that was created by the media is outdated and in need of refinements and professionally documented results.

Various forms of media make a point to discuss the fascination Americans have with modern war films. Two key points are addressed. The first point begins with the "realistic" components Hollywood attempts to address in their films, and the second a "moral compass" component audiences are forced to confront. There are many comparisons and oppositions drawn regarding war films beginning with the Vietnam War in the 70's to the Afghanistan war beginning in 2001.

After reviewing a vast amount of sources pertaining to Hollywood's take on war films, Philippa Gates was the first researcher to sustain clever points and conclusive data. Her article contains slight biases in favor of war veterans. It lacks the viewpoint of Hollywood cinema production and potentially why or why not a film is constructed using realistic information and moral integrity. Although this article is captivating and eye-

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opening there are very similar articles that relate to this topic and share similar

comparisons and contrasts. However in other articles there was a tendency to stray from the main focus. Other articles dedicated too much content to Hollywood and movie production and not necessarily the production and projection of war veterans key roles.

The research question at hand is, how does Hollywood portrays war veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder? This question is the purpose and base to the entire project. With the assistance of Gates, her groundwork will clearly address how war films are perceived and interpreted. This particular piece also brought attention to more facets commonly overlooked. For example, filmmakers attempting to exaggerate a veteran's image as a violent hero or comical cartoon. While focusing on the effects of war films and PTSD one can only feel that it is important to address these unrealistic perceptions and seek truth.

Hsin-hsin Huang and Susan Kashubeck-West (2010) list and describes the symptoms and various stages associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in their study. As stated in their research, "Exposure, Agency, Perceived Threat, and Guilt as Predictors of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Veterans", the three points are clearly highlighted in this article are combat exposure, perceived threats, and guilt due to PTSD. In this particular research "289 Iraq/ Afghanistan veterans were used as the base of the study. Of the 289 veterans used, of the 289 participants, 244 were men and 45 were women. Ages ranged from 19-60 years of age". The participants were asked three questions: had they witnessed "hurting, killing, or mutilation". They were given a two point scale (0=no, 1=yes) according to their answers they could be scored anywhere from 0-3. According to the researchers, higher scores indicated that the participant were

Hollywood & Media Portrayals of Veterans with PTSD #8
exposed to higher traumas.

Sources citing statistics are incredibly useful for the purposes of this project because it is able to visually breakdown Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and where it is most present. Unlike many sources in other databases, the researchers used real life subjects and were quite thorough with their collection and analysis of their data finds. There was no indication of biased opinions recorded or indicated throughout the journal. The researchers had an apparent purpose to seek raw and true answers. This study was honorable and respectful. Not only did they properly attain their research through IRB, but also formed alliances with organizations that rehabilitate returning veterans in an effort to properly assess them. To top it off they also made a dollar donation to the Wounded Warrior Project for every active participant in the study.

Fairly introducing what Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is and how one may be able to identify it makes this study whole. With extensive coverage on PTSD from many outside sources, both scholars and not, it is vital that this research is thorough about all sides of PTSD. Attaining one, maybe even two articles relevant for my study allows the research to enter great depths about what PTSD is, how people developed the condition and what seems to trigger a reaction. Hsin-hsin Huang and Susan Kashubeck-West (2010) did a fantastic job documenting gender, race, and age. Though not entirely relevant, these demographics played an important role on how veterans answered their study questions.

In recent years cinemas portraying war veterans as “conscience stricken” have become a taboo subject. The phrase “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder” is barely used in day-to-day conversations. To some it’s considered offensive and to others it’s a “self

Hollywood & Media Portrayals of Veterans with PTSD #9
produced illness” veterans develop upon returning home from war. Researcher Stuart Price, actively exploits Hollywood cinema and their portrayal of what a war veteran with PTSD must be like. He even goes on to state, “contemporary myths circulated within mainstream cinema”. This article boldly addresses how films have the power to create an unrealistic image for veterans returning home from war diagnosed with PTSD, mentioning that veterans with PTSD in the movies are seen as “weak” or “broken”. This portrayal has been fed for decades and is one of the common reasons PTSD to this day is a controversial and overlooked topic. No direct methods were used in this study, just critiques and observations about various war films.

This information is completely reliable for my study about how Hollywood cinema portrays war veterans with PTSD. The information within the article is slightly redundant, but the redundancy clearly indicates the purpose this article is trying to present. Some of the information found in this article can be crosschecked with one other sources collected, but overall this piece offers more insight and input as to what Hollywood war films do to create a constructive and destructive representation of veterans suffering from one or multiple forms of PTSD.

Every bit of information this piece of research offers anchors down the purpose my research is trying to hold. It is the backbone to this study and will help guide this research. The article shapes the many sides of true “psychological” phenomenons veterans with PTSD face versus the over dramatized mental instabilities veterans with PTSD in film are portrayed as having. Hollywood has a notorious tendency to exaggerate the content of their films for better rating and more money. War hero’s, who suffer from a mental illness developed from their brave sacrifices should not be downplayed,

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exaggerated or negatively depicted. Veterans with PTSD are still people who struggle to find their footing upon returning home, and with the large influence Hollywood has on society, they should be using their power to raise awareness not shame and pity on the men and women who suffer from the illness. Every means must have an end. By researching the psychological severity Post Traumatic Stress Disorder has and how it affects military veterans, discussing a remedy to treat (not cure) this disorder seems fitting. Kolk and Najavits conducted an interview and study in 2013 to explore “What is PTSD really?” In their research I found two pieces that rightfully address the need for “Trauma Training in Clinical Psychology” and “Training on Trauma in the Department of Veterans Affairs”. Both articles express in great depth that just because someone may hold a psychology degree, does not mean that the particular individual is vetted to treat a person, especially military veteran suffering from PTSD. In modern medicine, most hospitals carry doctors with a specific specialty to treat a patient accordingly. Kolk and Najavits argue that psychological care should be very much the same. Psychologist should only treat patients under whatever specialty they are certified in.

Considered a progressive war film, American Sniper depicts the life of deceased Navy SEAL sniper, Chris Kyle. After several tours following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the film tells the story of Chris as a child and life decisions he made that eventually lead him to be the most deadly sniper in American history. In the movie he's portrayed, as a typical man, who does his job, loves his family and loves his country. What separates this film from other war movies and veteran biographies is the direct exposure of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in an “American hero”.

PTSD is considered a taboo topic, and typically when PTSD is mentioned,

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especially in film, a character is pinned to image. In most cases, a broken victim or heartless hero. *American Sniper* plays fair when addressing Chris Kyle's PTSD. Despite critics belief that Kyle's PTSD was overtly exposed throughout the film. I believe Clint Eastwood, director of the film, made his audience see the human inside of Chris and the internal battle he fought to overcome. However, with Kyle's PTSD fairly exposed, the Marine at the end of the film (Eddie Ray Routh, who killed Chris Kyle in real life and the movie) also allegedly suffered from PTSD.

In my analysis of this film, I researched more about both Chris Kyle and Eddie Ray Routh. My findings were both eye opening and unsettling. With the help of the Freedom of Information Act, news reporter Wendy Innes and Washington Post writer Stephanie Merry, it was considerably easy to debunk any traumas responsible for Routh's alleged PTSD diagnosis. Innes made a compelling point to suggest that unlike Chris Kyle, Eddie Ray Routh held a "non-combat arms occupation of 2111 (Small Arms Repairer/ Technician or more commonly referred to as an Armorer)" at Balad Air Base. Balad Air Base is practically an Army Fort; no combative or traumatic occurrences were documented in the time Routh was stationed there. Which leads me to my final question, why is the media quick to label military members who commit a crime as victims of PTSD? Why does a soldier have to incomprehensibly kill another human being to be diagnosed with PTSD?

Overcoming Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is no easy task. Before the film *Lone Survivor*, many Americans lacked empathy for soldiers who suffered because they were not personally affected in their day-to-day lives. This film is a true story about a U.S Navy SEAL, Marcus Luttrell who was the only member in his team to survive a firefight

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against the Taliban in 2005. The movie clearly illustrates pre- trauma behavior, survival instincts, and post trauma behavior. As a viewer you re-live the trauma Marcus Luttrell endured and given the closest experience to it as humanly possible. After watching *Lone Survivor* in it's entirety, no one needs to know a military member or veteran on a personal level to understand how Post Traumatic Stress Disorder develops. Although PTSD is not the main objective in this film, it is suggested and vaguely implied by the end. It was not until 2013, when *Lone Survivor* was released in theaters and Luttrell began his press tours. Through his press tours and motivational speeches, Luttrell again re-lived his trauma with help of a companion. Luttrell's service dog, DASY (an acronym for him and his fallen teammates Danny Dietz, Matthew "Axe" Axelson, Southern Boy Marcus and Michael "Yankee" Murphy) a yellow labrador specialized in the rehabilitation and recovery of Luttrell's Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Although a subtle companion, DASY presence was symbolic to Luttrell's silent condition.

When ideas didn't go as planned, one may become frustrated with the situation and act out of pure emotion. In the film *Born on the Fourth of July*, I examine and assess the character Ron (played by Tom Cruise) in the movie. As a semi biographical film depicting the life of an actual war veteran, I explored the destructive side of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Veterans. Although just a film, I believe this film was created with a substantial amount of truth and insight to veterans who are not treated well upon returning home from war and the "fall from grace they experience" in their first weeks home. I was left with a substantial amount of questions, but the biggest being, "Now what?". What happens to our veterans when they return for war? Why is it that we send men and women to war only to abandon them and the help they need to reintegrate?

Born on the Fourth of July actively presents these questions and reminds viewers that returning soldiers need the understanding and compassion for the traumas they have suffered. Not uneducated assumptions due to false information in cinemas.

Multiple sources in my research demand the revision of social perceptions for veterans who suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Social perceptions can and will only be changed at the mercy of Hollywood and various forms of media outlets. I have referred to popular Hollywood films because I believe readers are capable of visually understanding the topic at hand. In recent months Clint Eastwood, director of *American Sniper* (2015) has created a new medium to explain war veterans who suffer from PTSD. Much like my own research method, he too used an interpretivist paradigm for his film. My main communication method for my research is the interpretivist paradigm meaning, I used a method that was centered around an appropriate dialog between researcher and subject. The purpose is to interact with the effort of tastefully building a study with a meaningful reality in the end. With interpretivist, my goal is to put myself in the perspective of my research. Hopefully through interpretivist I will gain a new insight to my topic and will have the tools to add depth. The media negatively portrays military veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). While media outlets harbor negative criticism, Hollywood filmmakers have the opportunity to counteract the negativity with knowledge and silver linings.

With soldiers becoming a popular topic in the last few years, active duty military members and veterans have been, in many cases, unwillingly thrown into an excessive amount of spotlight. Normally this alone is not an issue, except for the majority of military men, women, and veterans who return from combat suffering from Post

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Traumatic Stress Disorder. Through the media, stereotypes have been established among veterans who suffer from the condition. Recent military films, *American Sniper* and *Lone Survivor*, have received much attention but even more critique. The military community, had a lot to vocalize about the two films focusing mainly on PTSD and not reintegrating back into society. With the help of various celebrities sharing these same viewpoints, Got Your 6 was born. Got Your 6 specializes in breaking media stereotypes and breaking down problems society has created such as veteran reintegration. To my satisfaction, Got Your 6 has partnered with many famous faces in Hollywood, giving veterans a platform and a voice to stand tall and push past media born stereotypes.

Military veterans who suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder are at the mercy of Hollywood and the media. With help of Hollywood, society has glamorized faces such as Mark Wahlberg, Tom Cruise, and Bradley Cooper who were cast to re-enact heroes who suffer from unfathomable traumas. Hollywood is behind the creations of media opinions that mold the perceptions society has on psychologically distressed veterans. Some films have a tendency to depict a veteran who suffers from PTSD as a helpless victim or cold-blooded killer. There's a deficiency of honest and middle ground. I believe it's the work of Hollywood and the media that dictates how and when veterans feel safe to seek the help they deserve.

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